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ABSTRACT

Group discussion can be very effective in building a sense of community in any adult basic education (ABE) classroom. Such discussion can generate conversation, encourage participation, and create an accepting environment where sharing experiences and ideas feels safe to all participants. When trying the technique of group discussion with a new group, it is best to begin with an upbeat, noncontroversial topic that is of general interest and that relates to common experience. Everyone should be encouraged to contribute, and the amount of self-disclosure required should be limited, at least initially. Teachers should monitor the kinds of comments students make about each other's contributions and be sure to discourage critical remarks. Although all students should be encouraged to contribute, the more vocal students should be kept from dominating the discussion. As a further objective, teachers should ask students to defend their points of view. Eventually, more controversial topics may be introduced and more challenging topics may be selected. (MN)

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TECHNíQUES

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Conducting Group Discussions With Adult Basic Learners

by Jean H. Lowe, Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools

Group discussions can be very effective in building a sense of community in any ABE classroom or learning center even when students are working at different levels and especially when they come from different cultural backgrounds. Since increasing students' familiarity with their fellow learners seems to lead to better attendance and persistence, group discussions in ABE classes and learning centers are well worth the effort. They can generate conversation, encourage participation, and create an accepting environment where sharing experiences and ideas feels safe to all participants. Discussions are also a good way to increase mutual understanding while learning and having fun at the same time.

If neither you nor your students are experienced in group discussions, you will want to start simply with non-controversial content of general interest relating to a common experience. What would be a good beginning topic to elicit participation without the risk of negative or judgmental comments which might be discouraging to insecure learners? If your students represent different age groups, educational levels, or ethnic backgrounds, you might begin with certain memories from childhood. Memories about foods can be a good choice – especially foods like bread and soup which are common to all cultures. Students can describe smells and rituals – the anticipation of a special meal. Another possibility is to exchange memories about holidays involving children. It is surprising how sharing of this kind reveals the common and positive elements of human development. And shared experiences in these contexts tend to build a sense of community among learners with different backgrounds and to stimulate conversation along the lines of "Oh, really. Let me tell you what we did."

Here are a few specific guidelines for developing and improving group discussions.

1. As you begin this activity, choose upbeat topics which everyone can share.

2. Encourage everyone to contribute. While you don't want to force extremely shy students to talk, you do want to make it clear from the beginning that everyone has something important to offer. (The value of starting with personal reminiscences is that everyone has an experience as important and interesting as anyone else's. Since there are no experts or authorities, no one need be self-conscious or reluctant to participate.)

3. Initially, limit the amount of self-disclosure required. (Some students will find any group discussion threatening. Asking them to reveal intimate details of their personal lives may increase their feelings of insecurity.)

4. Monitor the kinds of comments students make about each others' contributions. Comments such as, "That's what happened to me, too" are positive. Critical remarks should be discouraged.

5. While you are encouraging input from all of your learners, be sure to keep the more vocal students from dominating the discussion.

Once you have had some experience with your group, you may want to change the focus of your class discussions to include additional topics such as, for example, a current news item or a popular TV show. Again, there are some guidelines to keep in mind. Be sure to encourage everyone to join in and accept without judgment all the opinions that are expressed by others. Try to avoid expressing your own viewpoints since so many students see the teacher as an ultimate authority. Your role in class discussions

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is to bring out your students' ideas and to ask questions about them. You want to create a climate which welcomes different viewpoints and increases students' confidence in their ability to express themselves to their peers. These factors are not only important to the individual self-concepts of your students, but essential to the development of a good discussion.

As a further objective, you also want students to explain why they hold particular opinions—to defend their points of view. For example, when you ask, "Who is your favorite character in the film?" their individual answers cannot be disputed, but you should ask them to elaborate and explain why they chose one character instead of another. Since some students have difficulty accepting opinions different from their own, you need to encourage these learners to look at both sides of issues. For example, you might ask students to discuss reasons both for and against passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Adults usually enjoy the give and take of discussions and will eventually begin to introduce more controversial topics. Once you feel comfortable with your group (and they with each other), and everyone has had the experience of a free and fair exchange, you will all enjoy more challenging topics. There are books and filmstrips that address controversial issues such as civil liberties or women's rights which could serve as the basis for discussion. Some filmstrips (which come with background information and discussion guides) offer case studies of real-life moral dilemmas and invite students to present and defend their own solutions. Similarly, books concerning values clarification contain simulation exercises in which students are forced to choose their own positions and then justify appropriate courses of action. Naturally, in these exercises there are no single solutions or right answers, but the fact that people usually have confidence in their own views assures exciting discussions.

The enjoyable atmosphere created by group discussions gives students practice in oral language, group interaction, and in expressing and defending their viewpoints. They gain confidence from being listened to respectfully as they improve their verbal abilities and initial analysis skills. And they learn to respect the ideas of others, sometimes modifying their own viewpoints as a result. Group discussions are worth trying.

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